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## The how of literature

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## The How of Literature

Ruth Finnegan

In a challenging article that starts not from the conventional Western literary canon but from traditional Japanese theatre, Andrew Gerstle (2000:43) has raised the interesting question of whether the concept of “performance literature” might be illuminating as an analytic and comparative tool when approaching the literatures of Africa and Asia. Further light on this has been shed by the impressive crosscultural range of the articles in this volume of *Oral Tradition* (20) and the comparative and interdisciplinary workshops that gave rise to them. My article also follows up Gerstle’s question, seeing it as of potential relevance not just for Africa or Asia but also for any literary forms in which performance has a part and thus for theories of “literature” more generally.<sup>1</sup>

It is a question well worth addressing. For despite the now-accepted problematizing of the concepts of “text” and of “literature,” conventional approaches to studying literature and literary theory still regularly bypass performance. As pointed out directly or indirectly in several of the articles here (notably those by Peter Middleton [2005] and John Miles Foley [2005]) the implicit starting point still seems to be that the defining heart of “literature” lies in “texts,” prototypically texts in writing; and that this is how and where literature exists. Most textbooks and glossaries on literature contain little or nothing about the complex *performed* aspects of literature in the sense of its realization as a publicly enacted display in the here and now;

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<sup>1</sup> My paper draws heavily on presentations, discussions, and follow-up interchanges related to the four comparative and interdisciplinary workshops on “Literature and Performance,” organized by Andrew Gerstle and Rosalind Thomas between 2001 and 2003 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Since my previous work had mainly focused on African and Western literary forms I found the Asian examples particularly illuminating and challenging.

if this is mentioned at all it comes in as something marginal to the prior and enduring existence of the written text.<sup>2</sup>

It is, perhaps, scarcely surprising that the usual dictionary definitions of “literature” focus on “writings” or “written texts” or that scholars have conceived of “literature” as basically existent in this form. After all, we have long accessed past literary enactments—across centuries, even millennia—through the medium of verbalized texts-on-a-written-surface. *This* is what exists, it seems; here are the objects we can get our hands and eyes on. Non-verbalized and non-writable performance dimensions, ephemeral and elusive, could not be captured or directly transmitted from the past, and therefore (*sic*) could be passed over as lacking any abiding graspable reality. The written verbal formulation, something hard and permanent, appears as the essence, a notion further reinforced in a range of influential languages by the association of “literature” with alphabetic writing (letters). As a standard reference book has it, “at its most neutral, and broadest, *literature* signifies textual manifestations of writing” (Wolfreys, Robbins, et al. 2002:51). Or, more directly, in a statement that would probably be implicitly accepted by many, Peter Widdowson defines literature as *written* works, by which he means “works whose originating form and final point of reference is their existence as written textuality” (1999:15). Literature must be “reproducible in print,” and (*ibid.*:127, 128)

a centrally determining characteristic of “the literary” . . . is that it is realised in a tangible object which is readily present for close inspection or re-reading, and that it does not have to be performed (or pre-emptively interpreted) in order to be read for the first time as unmediated text.

The notion of performance seems to lie outside this ground of literature, even be opposed to it. Indeed those who have pointed to the significance of performance have been less the literary scholars than anthropologists, folklorists, cultural historians, ethnomusicologists, and other scholars (and practitioners) coming to the issues from first-hand experience of performance arts and forms outside the conventional high-art Western canon. These scholars have now been strengthened by perspectives rooted in the continually developing genres of popular culture and by the growing acknowledgment of the wealth and reality of non-Western literary forms.

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<sup>2</sup> There are, certainly, references to “performative language,” with roots in Austinian “performative utterances,” and discussions about “performativity” or “performing” gender (and so on) in postmodernist contexts, but these seem to follow up rather different issues.

This article, then, attempts to take up Gerstle's challenge by some direct consideration of the concept of performance in the context of literature. How, if at all, does literature exist in performance? What has "performance" to tell us about literature and literary theory? And can we indeed best appreciate the literary forms of Asia and Africa by recognizing them as "performance literatures"?

### **Literature *Can* Be Performed: The Reality of "Oral" Literary Forms**

As is now well known in some circles—but worth adverting to again in this context—one way into tackling these questions has been through the notion of *oral forms* of literature. From some viewpoints this idea, of course, has never been contentious. The Homeric epics (in some sense at least "oral"), Elizabethan lyrics, performed poetry, folk tales, scripts for or from plays—all these have long been captured in writing and studied as literary texts. A next step, however, has been more radical: taking the *oral*-ness of such examples as a positive and essential quality of their nature. Through the so-called "orality" studies that have developed in various guises, mainly from the 1960s onwards, it has become increasingly clear that an oral performance can be analyzed not just as the contingent setting for some enduring—writable—text but as *itself* the central reality. There is now a large body of scholarship focusing on concepts like "oral," "orality," "oral literature" or "orature," concerned among other things to understand oral performance in its own (that is, oral) right.<sup>3</sup>

This has meant extending the concept of literary expression to include many unwritten forms and, equally significant, treating their orally performed qualities as crucial to their literary realization. South African Xhosa praise poetry, for example, declaimed in reverberating and unmistakable style by the praise singer, inspires its listeners through acoustic effects—rhythms, sonic parallelisms, strained mode of articulation, intonations, and ringing praise names (Opland 1998)—while the sophisticated artistry of Limba narrative in Sierra Leone lies not just in verbal content but in the vivid way the narrator voices the performance and the skillful use of vocal dynamics, tempo, and intonation (Finnegan 1967). Oral genres from throughout the world once dismissible as crude and "pre-literate," from Mongolian oral epics or the lyrics of Indian love songs to the

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<sup>3</sup> This is not a place for a survey of such work (more complex, variegated, and internally contentious than can be indicated here); see the treatments in Finnegan 1992; Foley 1995, 2002; and Honko 2000.

extensive unwritten performances of Africa, have now come to be analyzed as forms of literature—of “oral” literature.

Once we enlarge our gaze beyond the *written* objects alone, it also becomes clear that oral delivery is in fact a much more “normal” and frequent occurrence in the world’s literary experience than we would imagine from the conventional closures of English literature studies. In medieval Europe, for example, written texts did indeed exist, but public oral delivery rather than private reading was the typical mode of literary realization (see for example Coleman 1996). Oral performance of poetry was fundamental to literary experience at the Japanese Imperial court, and recitation the predominant mode for Japanese narrative (Gerstle 2001). Nor is this only in the past or outside Europe. English poetry readings take place in schools, pubs, colleges, halls, and other public places (Middleton 2005), while in American clubs and coffee houses “slam” performers compete in their scintillating manipulation of the arts of oral poetry, with rhyme, alliteration, coded gestures, and “electric and continuous exchange between poet and audience” (Foley 2002:5). The concept of performed oral literature has opened up a more generous understanding of the diversities of literary realization, taking us beyond the narrow notion of written texts and offering a whole new range of material for the student of comparative literature.

This recognition of the *positive* features of oral forms admittedly sometimes led to some overplaying of their significance and distinctiveness. It seemed for a time as if one single process had been revealed that covered *all* unwritten composition and performance. Elements of one of the powerful foundational Western myths sometimes shaped this too: the tale of a binary opposition between two contrasting types of social and cognitive organization, the one oral, communal, emotional, non-scientific, traditional, undeveloped, and primitive; the other literate, rational, scientific, individualistic, creative, civilized, Western, and modern. This made it easy to fall in with the projection of a far-reaching divide between oral and written, with the corollary that in those cultures—or genres or situations—where oral performance was significant, the literary forms would similarly be more communal, collective, or emotive (and so on) than for the conventional forms of “normal”—written, Western—literary texts.

Generalized dichotomies of this kind may still be remarkably persistent but are fortunately now approached with more caution. Certainly most serious scholars with any experience outside the parochialities of modern Western culture would question the attempt to take as universal the powerful Enlightenment vision that invokes the rationality of language and literacy as the characteristic of Western civilization and imagines

fundamental divisions among humankind tied to the presence or absence of (alphabetic) writing.<sup>4</sup> Instead they would point to the existence of not a single “orality” but multiple forms of oral expression to be found in the urban contexts of today no less than “far away and long ago.”

By now the diversities of oral literature are more widely recognized. Nor, contrary to what was once believed, does oral performance always emerge in the mix-and-match variability of composition in the moment of delivery. That is one form, certainly, famously attested in the Yugoslav heroic poetry studied by Parry, Lord, and other scholars in the “oral-formulaic” tradition.<sup>5</sup> But it has now become clear that oral literature also includes cases of prior composition and of exactly repeated delivery. Martin Orwin (2005) describes the unwritten “definitive texts” of certain Somali poetic genres that in a sense stand outside the moment of delivery and have their own abiding reality, with their qualities of exact repeatability and copyright. The same is true for some oral poetic genres in Oceania where the words of songs were composed in advance and great pains taken to ensure exact reproduction as they were rehearsed and eventually performed by choral singers. There is not just one form of oral literary realization but many different arrangements along a continuum of more or less crystallized and stable oral texts.

Nor is there just one relation between the “performed oral” and the “textual written” or always a clear distinction between them. As illustrated through many examples in this volume (20), and elsewhere, writing can interact with oral performance in many different ways: as performance score, dictated transcription, crib sheet, memory cue, hearing aid, prompt book, calligraphic representation, ceremonial memento, notes for a speech, printed version of a memorized poem, medium for scholarly exegesis, tool for helping audiences understand a performance as it develops, script for recreating or remembering a past performance—and multiple possible combinations or sequences of all of these and more. Wilt Idema (2005) describes the successive transformations of Chinese play texts, their varying functions and audiences, and, going along with this, their differing relations to performance, while Ardis Butterfield (2002) illustrates how refrains in thirteenth-century French romances hover and move between oral and written, performed and read. There are plentiful cases ranging from Japanese

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<sup>4</sup> For a forceful recent treatment of the implications of this particular myth, see Bauman and Briggs 2003.

<sup>5</sup> John Miles Foley observes that the original evidential foundation for this so-called “Oral Theory” was in fact rather narrower than once assumed (“balanced,” as he puts it somewhat harshly, “on the head of a pin” [2005]).



court poetry or European medieval oral delivery to contemporary poetry recitations, pop lyrics, radio, and television, where textual formations shift back and forth between oral and literate modes and can partake of both. The relation may change over time too or develop dynamically. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe comments on the transformative processing from written text to performance in the sequential phases creating theatrical performance. At first, performers (2003)

read their lines from the text (script) in front of them, but by a certain stage in the rehearsal process, no further progress is possible while the performers still have the script in their hands. They need to take the big leap of speaking their lines from memory, without the script in their hands, at first perhaps supported by a prompt, but more and more having to rely on their memory within the framework set by the world of the play itself.

In other contexts, as Peter Middleton (2005) demonstrates from contemporary poetry readings, *both* silent reading *and* live performance may be necessary to experience a poem. Written and oral forms can overlap and intermingle, and are related in manifold and variegated ways rather than existing as distinctive modes having hard-edged properties.

With all their controversies and multiplicities, the central insight from these studies of orality is a far-reaching one: oral forms are not only comparable to written literature in the minimum sense of being reproducible as written texts paralleling recognized written genres, but also have their own qualities in which performance and declamation *aloud* and to an audience are of the essence. This has rightly challenged the Eurocentric and high-art paradigm of literature as the norm by which all forms of verbal art are judged, and allowed a greater appreciation of the literary reality of many African and Asian forms as well as of popular genres outside the traditional European canon.

### **From “Oral Text” to Multi-Media Performance**

Despite its importance such a recognition hardly takes us far enough. Indeed too dedicated a focus on the “oral,” illuminating as it is, can be counterproductive. It may lead to the implicit assumption that *the* crucial feature of literature in performance is its oralness.<sup>6</sup> It is right to explore the

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<sup>6</sup> The same is sometimes implied even in Gerstle’s perceptive analyses (2000:59), otherwise notable for their attention to visual as well as “oral” features, or in Foley’s (primary though not exclusive) focus (1995) on the “oral” dimension of performance and

“oral” but the result can sometimes, paradoxically, be to implicitly reinforce the model of literature as, in the final analysis, written text. Oral performances and transcripts are treated as literature in that, and insofar as, they can be formulated in writing: either literature in some qualified sense (orally performed, but acceptable since it can be represented in words, and words are in principle writable); or becoming eligible to be considered as literature proper once actually transformed into written text. Such approaches can extend, but not radically unsettle, the position that something is literature when it is “susceptible to reproducibility in print” (Widdowson 1999:127) with its reality lying in the (writable) words.

Too narrow a focus on the “oral” also has another consequence: exclusion of other perhaps equally significant elements of performance. For performances may *not* be principally a matter of “words”—or at any rate not *just* of words. Characterizing a performance as “oral” may actually turn us away from a full appreciation of its multiform mode of existence.<sup>7</sup>

There are besides the verbal many auditory features of performance that are well illustrated in a number of the articles in this volume. Those who create performed literary art do not just emit spoken words; they also play upon the flexible and remarkable instrument of the voice to exploit a vast range of non-verbalized auditory devices of which the prosodic devices that are up to a point notated within our written literary texts—rhyme, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and acoustic parallelisms—are only a small sample. There are also the subtleties of volume, pitch, tempo, intensity, repetition, emphasis, length, dynamics, silence, timbre, onomatopoeia, and the multifarious non-verbal ways performers can use sound to convey, for example, character, dialect, humor, irony, atmosphere, or tension. And then there are all the near-infinite modes of delivery: spoken, sung, recited, intoned, musically accompanied or mediated, shouted, whispered; carried by single or multiple or alternating voices. Some combination from this array of

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its representation. This emphasis is complemented by the linguistic approach to performance that is often presupposed in literary theory (insofar as “performance” enters in at all), usually building on Austin’s concept of performative utterances and speech acts. Thus a recent standard textbook explains “performance/performative” as “the act of public exhibition that results in a transaction between performer and audience; an utterance that, via its public display, causes a linguistic [*sic*] interaction with the exhibition’s object” (Wolfreys 2001:305).

<sup>7</sup> One complication is the ambiguity and inexactness of the term “oral”: sometimes used to cover a broad range of meanings, but also commonly sliding into the narrower meaning (or at least strong connotation) of verbal, linguistic, and uttered by the mouth.



auditory resources, for the most part neither written nor easily-writable, is commonly central to both generic convention and performers' individual artistry. To say "oral" and look just to the (writable) words is only the start of a whole series of rich diversities. It goes beyond the vocal too, huge as that whole range is. Percussion and instrumental music can play a part too—well exemplified in several articles here; so too can the sonic ambiances and echoes of performance venues, even the noises that some may regard as external to the essential (verbal) text but may be an integral part of the event.

The complex auditory features of performance, though often overlooked, are happily now attracting wider interest. We get some real flavor of their significance from the way gramophone recordings are rightly drawn into this special issue on literature and performance (as in the papers by du Perron and Magriel and by Bauman and Feaster) as well as in Foley's detailed and meticulous analysis of the "acoustic reality" of a Slavic performance, Middleton's exposition of the sonic subtleties in poetry readings, or Schieffelin's vivid discussion of trying to capture the "verbal and aural components" of a Bosavi performance. Much remains to be done to further enhance our sensitivity to richness of sound, long blunted for many of us by the overwhelming book model into which we have been socialized; and, as Peter Middleton (2005) points out, the assumption that audio equipment of a fairly shallow frequency range is sufficient for recording vocal delivery (in contrast to music) may still be hindering our appreciation of some of the finer sonic effects of vocalization. But the increasing availability of auditory technology, ventures like the "e-companions" of this journal, and, not least, the kinds of widening insights evinced in this volume are allowing a fuller appreciation of the sonic features of performance.

But it is not, after all, just a matter of audition. Performers can also draw on an amazing constellation of visual resources. We can instance the uses of gesture, of facial expression, eye glances, bodily orientation, demeanor, visible movements, dress, ornament, and make-up. Material props like scepters, microphones, or pointers may enter into the act too, or associated visual images and exhibits: icons, pictures, prints, stage sets, and graphic displays. Touch and smell sometimes have a part too, and the corporeal experience of music with the tactile as well as musical and rhythmic interrelations of danced and embodied movement. The spatial and temporal dimensions of so-called "oral" performances bring their multiplex resonances too: the physical setting and arrangements, the timing and lighting, or the proxemic and embodied relations between the participants.

Time and time again performances turn out to be multidimensional rather than purely or essentially “oral.”<sup>8</sup> Literary forms we are accustomed to read as verbalized texts, with perhaps a nod to their vocal delivery, may now need to be re-assessed as multisensory. As Rosalind Thomas among others makes clear, our texts of classical Greek lyric and choral poetry “silent on the written page, were originally accompanied by the lyre and other instruments, and choral poetry was sung by a group . . . accompanied by dance” (2003:349). Isidore Okpewho characterizes oral literature and performance in Africa similarly—“the words spoken are only part of a general spectacle designed to please both the ears and the eyes” (1992:48)—while Kpelle epic performances from Liberia intermingle singing, narration, dramatic enactment, and instrumental accompaniment with “sounds and movements textured with the voice . . . an aural type of texture augmented with dramatic gestures. . . . The epic is heard, seen and felt” (Stone 1998:135, 137).

We must remember too that this may not just be a matter of one lead performer pouring forth words in a vacuum—a picture it is easy to presuppose if we assume the model of single-line written text—but of a performance where the audience too may be a meaningful part of the event. There can be multiple interacting performers, and multiple participants in overlapping roles who between them build the atmosphere and drama of the art as a displayed realization in actual space and time. They co-create the multidimensional and embodied performance.

It is somewhere within this complex of commingling arts that performances have their existence: visual, kinesic, acoustic, proxemic, material, tactile, moving, and embodied. Performances are realized in varying selections and degrees, certainly, depending on the conventions of occasion, genre, and social expectations as well as on the creativities with which the participants tackle both their constraints and their opportunities. Some have more variegated mixes than others. But all literary performance is in one way or another multidimensional. These multisensory features are not mere contingent additions to the concrete reality of the abiding text—that “tangible object . . . present for close inspection or re-reading” as Widdowson states it (1999:127, 128)—they are themselves a solid part of the action.

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<sup>8</sup> I use “multiplex” and/or “multidimensional” as shorthand for the arguably more accurate but ponderous “multimodal and multi-media” (terms that in some ways differ, in others overlap and that I do not try to distinguish here; on this see Finnegan 2002:ch.2).

### From Performance to Text to Performance?

This now seems to have re-driven a wedge between the bare single-line texts of “normal” written/writable literature and the exuberant multimedia life of performance. Trying to translate live performance into written transcript is indeed to shortchange its vital multidimensionality. Transferring a multi-faceted en-staged enactment into the simplex medium of writing may make a stab at capturing one dimension—writable words—but passes by those other elements in which it lives: “converting living species into museum exhibits” as Foley (2005) well expresses it. Correspondingly, a written script is surely a very different creature from the performance(s) into which it may ultimately be transformed. The two modes of realization—their means of existence—are simply not commensurate.

This is a significant issue, in the past only too often brushed aside. Thus performed African narrations were “reduced” (*sic*) to writing and treated as if the simplified texts that resulted had captured their reality. In ways now much more fully appreciated, a failure to take account of the multidimensional ontology of performance is to transform it, misleadingly, into something quite other than its original realization.<sup>9</sup>

However, before we are tempted again by the idea of some great divide between written text and multiplex performance three additional considerations need to be brought into the argument. First, the simplified contrast between performance—multisensory, dynamic, emergent—and written text—one-line, linear, fixed—misses the equally important fact that writing too is multimodal and contextualized. The multisensory characteristics of writing are often invisible to those brought up with the model of “the written word” as something abstract, mental, and context-free, another facet of the powerful model of literate rationality as prototypical of the high culture and destiny of the West. But a growing number of crosscultural studies of literacy have been challenging this ethnocentric myth to bring out the multimodality and materiality of writing.<sup>10</sup>

We need only reflect critically on our own experience. In approaching a piece of “writing” we attend to much else besides the lettered words themselves. The typographic format tells us at once whether it is to be read “as poetry” or “as prose.” Layout, spacing, and orientation (all non-verbal) show how we should read the text: as dialogue, quotation, refrain, title,

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<sup>9</sup> For further comment on this—often highly political—issue, see Finnegan 1992:ch.9 and Honko 2000, as well as a number of papers in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Kress 2003, Street 1993, Tonfoni 1994, and Finnegan 2002:229ff.

footnote, emphasis, start, finish, and so on; here are visually displayed features that are not themselves words and yet all pertain significantly to the literary art. Pictorial image, color, and the materiality of the display can enter in too. This is so even in the alphabetic systems familiar to the West, most obviously (but emphatically not only) in their calligraphic and religious efflorescence where writing is so clearly a form of visual art. More striking still are the rich non-alphabetic writing systems of Meso-America or of Asia. Japan, for instance, has a long history of the creation and preservation of literary texts as art objects, often with illustrations (Gerstle 2005); a Japanese poem exists not only in live performance but also as physical object, realized through the calligraphy, the nature and color of the paper, and the sketches that illustrate it: the poem is meant to be experienced as material (Shirane 2005). Carpenter (2002) notes the “traces of the brush” in the arts of East Asia as the calligrapher interacts creatively with the challenges of different writing surfaces, significant elements of literary formulation. Nowadays too we are becoming increasingly familiar with the multiplex potential of new typographies and of computer decorated extravaganzas where color, shape, icon, and moving image play such a large part: visual arts where the boundary between picture, writing, and graphic dissolves.

Writing has an acoustic side too. As we have seen written texts can be, and quite often are, realized in being recited or read out, bringing home the intersection between the sonic and the visual. The literature of the classical and medieval worlds was often delivered aloud while now too parents and teachers read to small children, pupils prove themselves in audible reading, and for many religious adherents the full import of sacred writings comes as much through auditory declamation as in silent reading. “Audio books” and computer “multi-media” increasingly blur the boundaries between sounded and visible text. Some sonic elements are directly conveyed in writing, like the visual indications of rhythm, rhyme, or emphasis. Others are created through the reader’s art, whether aloud or silently—for even “silent” reading is in a sense “performed” by the reader and, especially for poetry and dialogue, experienced acoustically through our “inner ear.” The resonances of auditory speech come through in our literate experiences too, both in a general way and in acoustic echoes of the kind Peter Middleton (2005) so well describes as shaping later readings of a poem first heard in public performance. Musical associations too sometimes run through written formulations, from the musical resonances in written versions of early French romance refrains (Butterfield 2002), a printed lyric that can also be a song, to the explicit “musicalization” of certain literary narratives (Wolf 1999).

Even leaving aside the elements of touch or olfaction that sometimes play a part, it becomes clear that in its actual practice even alphabetic writing has to be seen as both material and multidimensional, a matter not so much of objective referentiality as of a mix of arts shot through with overtones and multisensory intertextualities. Other writing systems add to the range, each with differing potentials and practices for the visible display of particular features, such as the indications for musical or vocal delivery (as in some of the Japanese texts described in Gerstle 2001) or the pictorial presentation of color, shape, or movement. This complexity is enhanced too in the cultural variability of *how* people read and relate to writing and the contexts in which they do so (indicated in such works as Boyarin 1993, Coleman 1996, Foley 2002:65ff., and Street 1993). This involves far more than just visibly fixed words or verbally informative content but in a sense the reader's "en-performancing" of written alphabetic texts or (less familiar to Western readers but highlighted by the many striking examples of Asian literary arts in this volume) of other calligraphic and pictorial embodiments of literary forms. Far from being "unmediated text," as in Widdowson's statement above (1999:128), any form of writing—and of written literature—is full of media.

All this brings into question that supposedly unbridgeable gap between multimodal situated performance on the one side as against unilinear unmediated print on the other. In specific situations and conceptualizations, of course, particular formulations may indeed be displayed and conceived as distinctive or contrasting, and an awareness of such specificities—culturally contingent rather than some universal norm—needs to be brought into the picture. But as analytic and crosscultural concepts the superficial boundaries between "performance" and written/writable "text" become less clear. What may in some cultural frameworks be envisaged as a divide can also, from a more comparative perspective, be understood as a fluid spectrum of multiplex resources drawn on in differing ways and contexts for human expression, whether visual, acoustic, musical, pictorial, kinesic, verbal, material, tactile, or somatic.

To this we can add a second point, brought out by the perspective recently developed by some scholars in which text and performance can be seen not as opposed but as essential, complementary dimensions of literary realization.<sup>11</sup> From this viewpoint *all* instances of literature are double-sided: created in the magic moment of performance but also enlarged into or

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am drawing particularly on Barber 2005, Orwin 2005, Schoch 2002, and Silverstein and Urban 1996; also stimulating email comments by Ed Schieffelin and Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2003.



reverberating with something more abstracted, detachable as it were from the flow.

So, on the one hand, there is the “here and now” of performance. Literature is experienced in terms of its immediacy, in the temporal moment. This can come in a variety of forms: through embodied enactment, for example, or public theatrical display, or, more subtly, through the enperformancing of a written text, the “now” when the reader personally encounters and re-creates it—“performs” it. Performance lives “in the present” (Phelan 1993:146).

But then—and of particular relevance here—there is also the sense in which that performed literary realization exists *beyond* that temporal moment too, in some more externalized and, as it were, transcendent mode: something that can be referred to or in some way reproduced. As well as the performancing emergent in the present acts of the immediate participants, there is something more: the text *in* the performance. This too can take diverse forms. It can be intangible yet still in some sense abstractable, as with the Somali “definitive” and repeatable poem-texts (Orwin 2005) or the (somewhat more fluid) “mental texts” that Lauri Honko (2000) sees as lying behind performers’ ability to deliver lengthy epics. It may be less verbally exact but still known as, say, a key plot, recurrent theme, performance convention, or building block for larger compositions. Or it may be a matter of visual and tangible forms “objectivated” in space, whether as physically written displays or as other material artifacts that in some sense encapsulate and parallel performance, like the Ashanti gold weights that represent proverbs or the visual images of dramatic characters or episodes in story or play.

The two dimensions overlap and intersect. The abstracted externalized text, detached from the immediacy of the temporal and personal present, carries the potential of meaning precisely insofar as its user has the experience to activate it here and now, while even in the midst of performance the experience is likely to be imbued with memories and connotations *beyond* the immediate moment. In her “Text and Performance in Africa” Karin Barber vividly formulates the inseparability of the two: “Entextualization . . . is not the opposite of emergent performance, but rather its alter ego; they proceed hand in glove with each other and are the condition of each other’s possibility” (2005; 2003:332). In this light it makes little sense to set up either “text” or “performance” as separate things or to make assumptions about the prior ontology of either—which makes it difficult to work with a definition of literature that posits that the written text must count as the “originating form or final point of reference” (as in Widdowson’s comment [1999:15] quoted above).



This leads to a third consideration. It is fair enough to point out the limitations of transcripts that aspire to transform performance into written text: such points still need making. But in our human culture such translations are in fact constantly happening. They are not confined to contrived scholarly transcriptions (though these too are part of the scene) but include regular transformations and interchanges among the many different modes of literary formulation.

Thus classical and medieval literature could be displayed through oral delivery, through multimedia theater, and in writing; Hausa literary forms in northern Nigeria were disseminated in parallel written and oral modes; Japanese court poetry was composed and appreciated orally but also circulated in writing and print; novels are read aloud or presented as “audio-books.” Similarly European ballads, songs, and stories have been realized through varying media, both concurrently and sequentially—in writing, in print, in live sung or spoken or mimed performance, in broadcast, and in electronic modes. A poem can be viewed in print, read aloud, sung in musical setting, taken down in dictation, recited from memory, enacted as a theme with variations, celebrated in vanity publication, embellished in beautiful illustrated format—and all of these are accepted in at least some sense and some contexts as versions of the same thing. Specific intermedial transformations may in some contexts be well accepted, in others highly political and contested, but in practice they are a regular part of literary experience and take place within as well as between cultures, languages, genres, and presentational modes.

Such transformations are part of our familiar lives, and neither readers nor listeners, performers nor composers, transcribers nor live participants are without some experience of their interactions. One medium intersects with another as the overtones from one form of realization seep into others. Peter Middleton (1995) explores vividly how both hearing the “readings” aloud and visually perusing the written texts play essential roles in the poetry performances he describes—their mutual and supportive interaction are familiar aspects of the scene that participants have no problem in utilizing. Though each case has to be considered within the accepted cultural conventions of its time, genre, or participants, this basic experience is scarcely rare. A performance brings memories not only of other performances but of other modes and re-creations. Print too may carry the sonic echoes of a sung acoustic performance. Someone who has once heard a poem performed by the Jamaican dub poet Lillian Allen, for example, or sung a hymn by George Herbert will surely always hear it in the printed book too: the performance *in* the text. Scripts may be intershot with

theatrical associations as they are variously used for private reading, prompts for learning, cues for action, or re-creations of performances; Kabuki illustrations may both evoke memories and give a stimulus for future embodied enactments; multisensory memories can move back and forward between oral, written, pictorial, or danced displays. “Reproductions” of performances can be imbued with the sounds and sights of the events from which in a sense they arise at the same time that they form a base for yet further realizations and exegeses, perhaps in different media, with the intertextualities—the multidimensional memories and associations—running variously through all of them.

There is no need to multiply examples, for such transformations, complex as they are, are a common feature of human life. Newly developed and/or changing formulations, or their recontextualized uses as they take on lives of their own, are not “artificial” devices whose “true” existence can only be grasped in terms of notionally more “original” or “authentic” manifestations but familiar points in the unending cycles of human creation. Insofar as there *is* a divide between performance and written text—and there are certainly circumstances in which such divides are signaled—then this is at least a divide that is in one way or another bridged every day, and in varying and variously used transformations that are themselves part of our multiplex experience.

Such transfers have their problems and debates, certainly, and specific instances are rooted, as ever, in particular historical situations. Some media may be more highly prized than others, or particularly emphasized in certain circumstances and not others—transformations that may perhaps be recognized as familiar but even so may not necessarily be experienced by everyone as in all respects identical (plenty of room here for inter-group and intercultural misunderstanding). Far from being limpid reflections, intermedial processes are shaped by human concerns and ideologies. Just as the articles by Bauman and Feaster and by Isolde Standish suggest that it is not self-evident how representations in early recordings or silent films would have been arranged or conceptualized, so too cultural choices and controls will always affect the shifting assumptions about “equivalences” and transfers between different modes of expression, including, but not limited to, those between “live” performance and print. But if the bridgings and the multiple media in play are familiar elements of human experience, this is something we need to recognize as part of the reality, rather than either

ignoring them or imposing narrowly conceived paradigms about some *a priori* importance of any one of these many variegated forms of display.<sup>12</sup>

These minglings of arts run along multiple dimensions, then, as they are formulated in particular manifestations and realizations. Performance and text are not, after all, two opposed or independently existing entities or states. Once we take account of the pervasive multimodality and intermedial nature of human expression these once-clear boundaries dissolve. Literary displays turn out to range through a multiplex spectrum of overlapping and intermingling modes and media, human usages, temporal moments, and spatial incarnations. We may be right to continue to worry about the purposes and powers that particular agents may exert in their capture of human expression—as transcript, audio-recording, film, “tradition,” and so on. But we would also be wise in any given case to avoid prior preconceptions about which manifestation is the “real” or the “original,” whether in terms of the media drawn on or of the specific nature of their exhibition in spatial or temporal terms. Transformations and intersections among a cornucopia of modes are, after all, commonly recognized processes. Rather than just juxtaposing “text” and “performance,” it may be more illuminating to explore the varying ways that humans draw selectively on a multi-faceted abundance of expressive resources and formulations.

## How is Literature?

Does that mean that amidst all this multiplexity the notion of “literature” has dissolved? Are we left just with the multifarious and, no doubt, wonderful array of human expressive media and modalities but no viable idea of literature?

In my view that would be to go too far. My argument is not that we should collapse the study of literature into “cultural studies” or abjure such notions as “literary” (in fact the observant reader will have noticed that I have begged the question by using it from the start). I believe we should

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<sup>12</sup> While not proposing it as a technical term, I like the broad coverage conveyed by the term “display,” which can bridge both literary text and literary performance (insofar as these are distinguishable): it functions both as verb (e.g., displaying by reading aloud, exhibiting through a film, performing on stage) and as noun (e.g., display as material and visual object, spectacle). The term “display” also usefully carries the idea of some thing or action singled out for special attention (more, or less) but without prior commitment as to what media are involved (the terms “text” and “discourse” are sometimes used in somewhat similar senses but their heavily linguistic/verbal connotations make them less appropriate for my purposes).

retain the concept of “literature.” But I suggest that we should envisage it not as definable by reference to Western written genres, but as an umbrella notion that can embrace all those displayed forms and events in which verbal artistry in some way plays a significant part.

“Literature” in this light is a relative and a plural concept. “Verbal artistry playing some significant part”—that is a matter of degree and of interpretation. In some instances the verbal element may indeed be dominant, though it remains important not to jump to conclusions about its priority or assume it can best be treated in isolation. In other cases—or for some participants, other occasions—words as such may indeed play a role but in some senses be subservient to, or in essential symbiosis with, music, rhythm, or dance. The lyrics of some contemporary rock songs, for example, are certainly verbally articulated but, as Simon Frith well argues (1998), the joys of embodied movement and excitement carry as much import for their participants as the apparent messages of the lyrics. We can recall too the Japanese playwright and theorist Zeami’s insistence that in composing a Nô play the musical and theatrical structure and the dance patterns come first, the words later (Gerstle 2000:47), the importance of drum-language patterns in Ewe funeral chanting (Burns 2005), and the priority of music over verbal text in Hindi *khyal* songs (du Perron and Magriel 2005). Foley (2005) refers us to the question of music in South Slavic epic performance where, contrary to the “normal” book-based model of the verbal text as bedrock, music “not only accompanies but idiomatically cues the narrative . . . a full partner in the holistic experience of performance.” Or again, the pictorial or artifactual may take priority over, or at the least play a complementary role alongside, the more verbal dimensions of the text. Haruo Shirane (2005) describes the high standing of Japanese calligraphy and its interaction with poetry, so that “a poor poem with excellent calligraphy was probably preferable to a good poem with poor calligraphy.” The voice-over narrations of the “photo-interpreters” of Japanese silent films (Standish 2005) or the spoken dialogues of later sound films and videos can be appreciated as forms of literary expression, in these cases rooted in a setting of moving visual images. In other cases still, the verbal artistry may be experienced in more tenuous or elusive ways, working through evocations and associations rather than in explicit verbal articulation, as with Japanese Kabuki prints or classical Greek vase paintings of characters or episodes that also figure in drama. Amidst all these just where we decide to set the boundary of “literature” becomes a matter not of principle or of “normality” but of judgment.

Literature is thus seamless at the edges not just for all the well-hewn arguments about the canon, the nature of “art”/“aesthetic,” or “high” versus

“ordinary,” but also in any given case for how, and how far, verbal art plays a significant part. It varies with genre, situation, participants, cultural tradition, and ideology. Even what at first sight looks like a thoroughly verbal formulation (and perhaps conceptualized as such for some contexts or purposes) may in practice be shot through with acoustic resonances, visual imagery, or material exhibition—varying with differing participants or differing cultural expectations but nonetheless a significant part of the mix. Rather than “extra-literary” or “protoliterary,” such features are an essential part of the full literary realization. Alongside the other issues with which they deal, our theories of literature need also to recognize the problematics around the relative significance and role of the verbal component within the multidimensional web in which it is set.

A multidimensional view of literature’s basis of reality is the more timely given the increasing spread and accessibility of modern audio-visual technologies. The prime locus for capturing the ephemerality of embodied speech and action might once have seemed to lie in the permanence and replicability of print, thus giving a privileged ontological status to the written word (“seemed” because it is surely only the linguistic bias of certain sections of Western tradition that has allowed us to downplay the relative permanence and, for many centuries now, repeatability of pictorial representation). But now that storing and transmitting sound, image, and movement have become commonplace, an enhanced sensitivity to the realities of multi-media literary displays can scarcely be regarded as revolutionary.

Taking this more plural approach to literature gives a vantage point for comparison. How far are particular literary genres or displays realized in more or less visual and spatial form? En-gestured, en-verbalized, en-danced? Enacted through a mixture of media, including material artifacts? Co-created in the joint or differentiated contributions of plural participants or dialogic exchange? Or realized at specific points in time and/or formulated as detachable from the flow of the moment? And what are the relations, changing no doubt in different phases and circumstances, between these various features? All these become sensible and illuminating questions for comparative study, central rather than marginal to the study of literature. In the conventional Western literary canon—one wonderfully elaborated tradition but *only* one among many—literary art has often taken the form of visually displayed words to be experienced and analyzed in sequential linear form; whereas what strikes an outsider about many Asian literary forms is their pictorial-cum-theatrical spectacle and their association with physically embellished art objects; a somewhat different prioritizing again from the



often musicalized, en-danced, and verbalized, rather than artifactually materialized, bent of African literary forms. Of course, one no sooner essays such generalizations than exceptions and qualifications abound, not least the profusion of variegated forms in all these areas and the long mutual contacts between the manifold human forms of literary display over the centuries and across the continents. All one can say is that, first, such questions are worth asking, though doubtless for particular genres and examples rather than for wide regions of the world, and second, that any analysis of literary forms needs to be sensitive to the *multiple* dimensions likely to be in play—these are not deviations but part of the reality of literature.

Underlying the discussion here has been the creative idea of “performance,” the stimulus for alerting us to aspects too little considered by literary scholars and of greater comparative reach than the closures of “literature” into “written text.” The concept of “performance literature” has perhaps turned out less illuminating as a crosscultural analytic term than it seemed in prospect, at least in the sense that it does not after all correspond to some special category of literature. This is partly because, as suggested earlier, *all* literature is in a sense “performed”: the interesting question is more about “how” than “whether.” There are also problems about a twofold model (whether phrased as written/oral, text/performance, written literature/performed literature) where the first term may seem to count as “normal” literature, the second as literature only in a qualified way. In practice it has emerged that rather than two contrasting categories there are a multitude of ways in which creativity-cum-convention can be artfully realized through words intermingled with other media. In some cases written or spoken words may indeed be used to play a leading role, while in others they may have some part but only as interwoven with, perhaps outranked by, dance, music, gesture, visual images, or tangible artifacts; and it is only in and through this multisensory mediation that words reach their full realization. It is to the cross-cutting multiplexities and relativities of time, space, multiple participants, and multiple media, rather than to some special class of “literature,” that Gerstle’s fertile challenge and, with it, the seminal concept of “performance” can direct us.

Finally, let me both qualify and reiterate the case for retaining the familiar concepts of “literary” and “literature.” These concepts, together with the (English) terminology of “words,” “the verbal” or “the linguistic,” do not and cannot altogether get away from culture-bound connotations and ambiguities. The same applies to the hidden assumption, prevalent in many Western scholarly sites, that the literary is somehow the “top art,” and the linguistic—and especially the written—*the* pre-ordained mode for truly capturing reality. An alternative approach, and one arguably more congenial



to some cultural traditions, might have been to start from dimensions that transcend linguistic articulation, like, say, “the musical,” “the danced/embodied,” or “the pictorial,” and bring together some comparative conspectus of how *these* realizations too involve a shimmering crosscultural constellation of arts (that may or may not include the verbal in any given instance). But it is surely also reasonable to pursue the complementary strategy of taking a comparative look at the *literary* displays of human art. The verbal role in these variegated displays may indeed be elusive, relative and contested, and always needs to be understood in its multidimensional framework. But the recognition of this multiplexity, far from undermining our study of the wonderful human artistries and practices of literature, in fact gives us a better handle on understanding the modes in which they exist. It makes it possible to get away from the idea that there is just one “proper” form of literature with its essential reality lying in written alphabetic texts, while still retaining a commitment to the understanding and appreciation of literatures—relative and plural as that notion turns out to be—across the world.

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